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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with determining the influences of biographers' gender on the content of biographies of women. The following questions are addressed: Do some treatments of subjects produce feminist or sexist biographies? What are the principal characteristics of both forms? Which, if any, of these features combine to result in identifiable subgenres? Materials analyzed include biographies of Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Angelina and Sarah Grimke. Comparisons are made with biographies of Keats, Shelley, Hugo, and Disraeli. A different time period is represented by the biographies of Mary, Queen of Scots, and Oliver Cromwell. Definition of the differences between sexist and feminist biographies includes authors' treatment of such factors as physical appearance, social roles, and psychology and motivation. It is concluded that the sex of the biographer is not the necessary determinant of the biography's orientation; both sexist and feminist biographies may be written by either men or women. (KS)

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Definitions of Feminist and Sexist Biographies of Women

Everybody knows what a biography is--just as everybody knows what a poem is; it looks like one. Although countless critics have devoted countless volumes to exploring the nuances, variations, and subgenres within the vast areas of poetry, they have unfortunately paid very little attention to biography, an equally diverse and varied genre.

Yet if one has read a single biography, one has not read 'em all; as we recognize, to read even a single thorough biography about a given subject is not to know the person fully. As Virginia Woolf observed in Orlando, that most profound commentary on biography, "A biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand."[1] So the reader of a single biography comes to know these six or seven selves, products (among other things) not only of the subject's own time, nationality, culture, profession, mores, and gender, but of the biographer's. To read another biography of the same person is to be exposed to still other selves of subject and biographer, in addition, possibly, to some of the selves encountered in the first biography. And so on.

This paper will explore men and women biographers' treatments of the varied selves of men and women biographical subjects in relation to their gender, to determine the influences of gender on biography. It asks: Do some treatments of the subjects produce feminist biographies? Sexist biographies? What are the principal characteristics of each? And do these features combine to result in indentifiable subgenres?

Research Design and Method

Because this study and its concluding definitions result from an inductive analysis of biographies, it is appropriate to explain my research design and method.

The biographies used here represent various typical modes and methods in twentieth century biographies of quality. Biographies of prominent rather than lesser known women are suitable because of the magnitude of both the subjects' influence and of interest in them, which has resulted in diverse and variable biographical treatments.

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I have selected subjects of roughly comparable time periods, cultures, and activities--authors and leaders in women's rights--to insure that the differences in biographical treatment can be attributed to causes related to biographical concern with gender rather than to intrinsic differences in the subjects' lives or milieus.

Thus the materials analyzed include biographies of four nineteenth century women writers, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, and George Eliot, and of three nineteenth century feminist leaders, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Angelina and Sarah Grimke. Appropriate for comparison in time and culture with men of similar professions are biographies of Keats, Shelley, Victor Hugo, and Disraeli. For contrast in the subjects' time period, biographies of two other political figures, Mary Queen of Scots and Oliver Cromwell, suffice.

In order to arrive at a representative cross-section of the biographical treatments of women, I established five categories which seem most explicitly related to the sex of the biographer and of the subject and which have permitted fruitful comparison within and among groupings.

They are:

1) Feminist biographies: Biographies written from an avowedly feminist point of view. These include Mary Jane Lupton's Elizabeth Barrett Browning (n.p., Feminist Press, 1971) and Mary Ann B. Oakley's Elizabeth Cady Stanton (n.p., Feminist Press, 1972); Gerda Lerner's The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina, whose feminist perspective is apparent in the subtitle, Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); and Margot Peters's biography of Charlotte Bronte, Unquiet Soul (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

2) Multiple biographies of a given woman written by both men and women, to see whether the biographer's gender creates a bias in the treatment of the woman subject, and if so, in what ways. Here I have used biographies of Emily Dickinson, whose reclusive renunciatory life might be an appropriate focus for feminist or sexist biographers, by: Josephine Pollitt (1930), Genevieve Taggard (1934), George Whicher (1938), MacGregor Jenkins (1939), Millicent Todd Bingham (1945), Richard Chase (1951), Rebecca Patterson (1951), Thomas Johnson (1955), and Richard Sewall (1974).[2]

3) Multiple biographies of a given man, written by both men and women, to determine whether the biographer's gender creates a bias in the treatment of the male subject and if so, in what ways. Again, I have selected a man, John Keats, whose life, works, and personality might be particularly susceptible to interpretations from feminist or sexist biases. Here, I am using biographies--all of which are

titled John Keats--by Amy Lowell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), Walter Jackson Bate (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), Aileen Ward (New York: Viking, 1963), and Robert Gittings (London: Heinemann, 1968)--in this case, the very best of a sometimes varied and bizarre lot.

4) Biographies of both men and women by the same male biographer, to see whether he uses the same standards, evidence, perspectives, methods, for presenting and interpreting the life of a woman that he used for the life of a man, as in Andre Maurois' Léila: The Life of George Sand (1953),[3] Ariel: The Life of Shelley (New York: D. Appleton, 1924); Disraeli: A Picture of the Victorian Age (New York: D. Appleton, 1928); and Victor Hugo and His World (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966).

5) Biographies of both men and women by the same female biographer, for reasons analogous to those above: does she use the same standards, etc. in presenting and interpreting the life of a woman that she uses for the life of a man? I have chosen Antonia Fraser's Mary Queen of Scots (1969)[4] and Cromwell: Our Chief of Men (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973) partly because of their intrinsic merits, partly because very few women biographers have written books of quality about both men and women.

To see whether the times and mores of the biographer influenced his or her views of the subject's gender I also analyzed two books written much earlier than the rest of the twentieth century volumes in this study: Elizabeth Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857) and Leslie Stephen's George Eliot (1902)--the latter, like Richard Chase's Emily Dickinson, part of a "Men of Letters" series [italics mine].

The entire analysis of this most fascinating evidence is too lengthy and complicated to provide here; it will be part of my book-in-process on method and technique in biographies and autobiographies of women--and men. However, I have used here some quintessential samples of the evidence to illustrate these most significant dimensions in the definitions of feminist and sexist biographies.

Purposes of the Biographer

Above all, feminist biographies are written to explore the lives of women who have "broken the mold to fulfill their creative, intellectual impetus" (Peters, xv), whether through activism for women's rights, through personal overcoming of the "cruel and frustrating limitations" (Peters, xv) society imposes on women, or through the creation of artistic works that show women gaining in self-confidence and strength and triumphing over adversity.

Sexist biographies, on the other hand, are usually not written for the purposes of advancing men at the expense of women, or even to denigrate or demean women. That they in fact do this is simply a

manifestation of the biographer's value system that he or she takes for granted and uses to interpret events, personalities, and relationships in the subject's life. Thus Maurois says, offhandedly, in Ariel, of Shelley's young wife, Harriet: "She was a pretty woman and she knew it, and for a pretty woman a life without luxury is as hard to bear as a subordinate position for a clever man . . . . she knows too that youth's a stuff that won't endure. Just as a strongly armed nation desires to ensure her place in the sun, before demobilizing, Woman wishes to exact good terms for her enemy, Man, before resigning herself to the pacifism of old age" (p. 128).

Subjects of the Biographies

Because of their purpose, feminist biographies are about women who are either intellectually or physically active (or both); or who are creative, innovative, independent; or who are trailblazers for the rights or lifestyles or self-expression of other women and like-minded men.

Sexist biographies, having no intentionally sexist purpose, can be about anyone in any circumstance.

Social, Intellectual and Other Influences on the Subjects

Most of the biographers studied here discuss their subjects' works and behavior in connection with relevant environmental, political, economic, intellectual, religious, or social milieus, as appropriate. Thus Fraser interprets the lives of both Mary Queen of Scots and of Cromwell almost invariably in some combination of political and religious contexts. Richard Sewall devotes an entire volume of his two-volume biography of Emily Dickinson to a review and interpretation of "her cultural world, her schooling, her world of books, ideas, literary affinities" (I, 10), her Puritan New England heritage, and her meaningful human associations--for better and worse. Therein he provides an utterly convincing illustration of his claim that "the more one knows about background, foreground, center, what's 'above' and what's 'below,' the more real the poems become and the more awesome Emily Dickinson's achievement is seen to be" (I, 13).

Achievements of the Subjects

Many of the feminist biographers, Lerner excepted, emphasize the social context in which their subjects lived as the primary influence on their actions, and these biographers accord the highest value to their subject's achievements in relation to their society.[5] Peters sees Charlotte Brontë's life and art as "both an eloquent protest against the cruel and frustrating limitations imposed upon women and a triumph over them" (xv). Lupton claims that Elizabeth Barrett Browning "failed to realize, until . . . late in her career . . . that women, by virtue of rigid social conditioning, were not encouraged to express their full beings" (p. 21). So in her earlier

poetry she "invariably disguised her sex and wrote as a neutral person" (p. 21), accepting male-determined standards [and] presenting in her earlier poetry conventional portraits of male or female behavior from a neutral point of view" (p. 21).

Feminist biographers value above anything else whatever their subjects do that promotes the causes of women's rights and achievements, whether it be organizing campaigns for women's suffrage or writing novels or poetry which demonstrate sensitivity to the rights and strengths of women, as well as an awareness of the injustices women have experienced historically or personally. They put their emphasis where their values are, stressing external activities rather than internal psychology.

This perspective helps to account for Lupton's devaluing of Sonnets from the Portugese and her doctrinaire (or idiosyncratic, depending on one's viewpoint) enthusiasm for Aurora Leigh. She claims that Sonnets "reveals the particular poet at her socially weakest and most dependent rather than--as we find her in the far superior and badly neglected poem, Aurora Leigh--strong and self-reliant" (p. 35). While acknowledging Aurora Leigh's "preposterous plot" (p. 69), "pious sentimentality" (p. 81), and "wordy arguments" (p. 81), Lupton nevertheless devotes 15 per cent of the biography to explaining why it's the best of the poet's works, primarily because it shows Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a social critic, "sensitive to the plight of women" (p. 68). Thus Lupton counters previous underestimation with overestimation; but do two excesses create a critical balance?

Likewise, although Peters claims that "Jane Eyre is not a social tract; it is . . . a work of art," (p. 219), the novel gains her highest praise because of the "radicalism inherent in a story of a plain, obscure, impoverished [and "aggressive"] woman who by dint of will, energy, and a highly developed sense of selfhood triumphs over caste, wealth, and custom" (p. 219). Peters's feminism applauds, too, the triumphant conclusion in which Jane is finally able to live with Rochester after "he understands fully that her person and her rights are as important as his. Charlotte could not imagine any man learning this except by cataclysm. Only after fire, blinding, and mutilation is Rochester's male vanity humbled and Jane able to report that their married felicity is founded securely upon equality" (p. 220).

In contrast, Maurois gives particular significance to Sand's novel, Léila, not because of any promotion of sexual equality but because he reads it as an emblem of the author's life and personality: The novel's theme is that of "the maternal woman in love. . . . But it is not as a mother that Léila longs to love, but as the courtesan, Pulcheria, her own sister . . . ." (p. 176).[6] Pulcheria knows "how to share in a pleasure which [Léila] has never known, though it is so easily enjoyed by other women, the pleasure of physical passion, becomes the . . . sole controlling influence of her life, the one

and only goal of her desires . . . . The novel proves that . . . George, nearing her thirtieth year, could bring a lucid analysis to bear upon herself" (p. 178). Here the literary caliber of the novel is irrelevant; its autobiographical--and sensual--qualities are what count.

Needless to say, much commentary on literature in other scholarly and/or middle-of-the-road biographies of authors neither social nor sensual, but focuses on the literary characteristics of the works considered.

Biology

What does the biographer have to say about the subject's biological characteristics? In the case of the biographies studied here, the answer is usually "Nothing." Biology per se is not used as an explanation for any person's actions or motivations, in the sense that he has a penis or a beard or she has a vagina and breasts.[7]

Health, Strength, Physical Activities

Generally, the ways that the biographers deal with their subjects' health, strength, and physical activities do not depend particularly on the person's sex, either. The subjects of my study had more than their share of physical frailties and chronic illnesses, as is evidenced by Mary Queen of Scots' fading health in captivity; Keats's congenital weaknesses and tuberculosis; and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spinal injury, nervous sensitivity, and prolonged invalidism. These people were sick because of accident, environment, constitutional fragility, not because they were male or female, and their biographers comment on the illnesses in terms of causes, symptoms, and effects rather than in terms of sexuality. Their deteriorated physical condition, whether Keats's or Angelina Grimké Weld's, caused them to curtail their activities.

The exception is Margot Peters's discussion of birdlike Charlotte Bronte's death at 39, during her first pregnancy. Although the doctor recorded "phthisis" as the cause, Peters claims on the basis of the symptoms reported by Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte's first biographer, that this fragile woman died of "'hypermesis gravidarum'--severe, pernicious morning sickness" (p. 410), a disorder of "neurotic or 'high strung' women with serious personal or family worries" (p. 410), possibly a manifestation of "the mother's unconscious rejection of the baby" (p. 410).

If a woman dies of the complications of pregnancy, the explanation may reasonably be attributed to her sex. However, Peters adds a psychological interpretation which supersedes biology: "[W]as her death . . . in a sense voluntary--an unconscious solution to an unsolvable conflict--as she felt it--between her art and her marriage?"

(p. 405). Therein, Peters sees Charlotte's death conforming to the biographer's feminist view that marriage to the dogged, unintellectual curate Arthur Nicholls "blighted the great powers of Currer Bell" (p. 399).

Physical Appearance

Biographers often describe their subject's physical appearance in great detail, as befits the curiosity of their readers. They often treat appearance matter-of-factly. Even André Maurois, notably sexist in many of his comments on George Sand, merely observes of her adoption of masculine clothing, "what a joy to have ceased to be a female slave" (p. 133).

At other times they evaluate appearance according either to the subject's contemporary standard of beauty, current standards, or an aesthetic ideal. Antonia Fraser describes Mary Stuart's "lovely leaning head, long almond-shaped eyes, and the beautiful disposition of head, neck and shoulder" (p. 19) which significantly "resembled the contemporary Mannerist ideal" (pp. 90-91). Primarily in combination with behavior or temperament does physical appearance assume sexual significance in these biographies.[8] Thus Fraser continues, "Nor must it be forgotten that to these physical attributes she added the essential human ingredient of . . . a charm so powerful that even [John] Knox was openly afraid of its effects on her Scottish subjects . . . . It was the charm of Mary Stuart, that charm which is at once more dangerous and the most desirable of all human qualities, which put the finishing touches to her beauty in the eyes of her beholders" (p. 91).

Considerations of temperament are more likely to bring out the biographer's sexism or feminism than are considerations of biology or physical health. The personalities of vigorous women active in the causes of women's suffrage and other rights win the hearty approval of their feminist biographers. Thus Gerda Lerner admiringly refers to Sarah and Angelina Grimké as "radical renegades" (p. 268), who with "stubbornness, courage, and dedication" (p. 368) lived their "faith in the freedom and dignity of man, regardless of race, regardless of sex" (p. 368).

Other types of temperaments which some consider typically and annoyingly feminine elicit the sexism of some male biographers. This is particularly true of some of the men who write about Emily Dickinson, who are irritated by her occasional coy, kittenish role playing in poetry and in letters, and by her alteration of the spelling of her name to "Emilie" from age 18 to 32. Richard Chase, who devotes over one-tenth of his biography to this phenomenon,[9] explains: "For all her fine and mature femininity, she always paid some obeisance to little womanhood. Her coy and oddly childish poems of nature and female friendship are products of a time when one of the careers open to women was perpetual childhood" (pp. 93-94). *He* sees this as

a manifestation of "that curious and marked unevenness of the poet's mind, the marked disparities we see in her bad taste, her coyness, her playfulness good and bad, her elaborate artifice . . . ." (p. 258). "More than most women," says Chase, "Emily Dickinson displayed the enormous conservatism of temperament which after the first two or three decades discourages any radical liberation or mutation of personality" (p. 104).

Psychology, Motivations

Male biographers are much more likely than their female counterparts to make generalizations about the allegedly feminine psychology of their women subjects. Maurois's Léila, for instance, is punctuated with such categorical statements as "In every woman who is in love with love there is, unknown to herself, something of the bawd" (p. 179). His dubious omniscience is undercut by other equally facile platitudes: "No woman in love but regrets that she cannot offer lost virginity, an untouched body, and an innocent heart to the man of her choice" (p. 145). Yet in the three volumes about Shelley, Disraeli, and Hugo, Maurois makes but a single comparable generalization about men--and that in connection with women: "A husband in his glory is not necessarily a lovable person . . . . As a mother gives herself to her child, the poet [presumably male] gives himself to his work. He becomes exacting, dominating, authoritarian" (Hugo, p. 50). The biographers studied here are on the whole much more likely to deal with masculine psychology in terms of the individual, rather than to generalize about men as they do about women. For instance, Aileen Ward says of Keats's strange--and uncannily accurate--premonition in 1818 that he had only three years to live (which followed a sore throat that might have been a secondary symptom of syphillis), "It was unreasonable, and no doubt he told himself so and tried to shake it off. . . . [yet] he also knew it was possible" (p. 185).

Feminist biographers are often indifferent to the psychology of their subjects, except for Margot Peters's pervasive concern with Charlotte Brontë's "unquiet soul." Yet Peters, like the other feminist biographers, interprets her subject's "internal conflicts, ambivalent drives that warred within her" (xiv) less in terms of the personal and individual than in terms of the social and collective: "Many [conflicts] were created by her position as a woman in a society which oppressed women and as a writer in a society that thought 'female authors' neither legitimate artists nor ornaments of their sex" (xiv-xv).

The biographers of male authors, and of Emily Dickinson, seem simply to assume that these authors have a highly personal and individualistic urge to create, which is sufficient motivation for their literary activity. These biographers are either indifferent to social forces or believe them to be irrelevant. Typical is Aileen Ward's sexually neutral explanation of Keats's maturation as a poet: "He had left the struggle to become a poet far behind, along with the lesser hopes of winning fame and fortune through his poems.

Being a poet he now realized, was no glorious thing in itself but merely a fact of his own nature. What alone mattered was the activity of writing, the kingdom of his own creation which he entered every time he sat down to work. Beside this solitary delight the world's applause or contempt meant nothing" (p. 224).

Social Roles

Feminist biographers are more inclined than other biographers (Marxians excepted) to explain their subject's social roles as being socially imposed and predetermined,[10] rather than individually fulfilled in the woman's own way and from her independent desire. Although the same may in fact be true of men, the biographers of men rarely consider this, and seem instead to see men as having more individual, independent control over their own destiny than women do.

Daughter and Sister Roles

Social imposition of roles is particularly true of daughter and sister roles, into which the female is born and over which the parental family exerts considerable influence. Thus Lupton claims that Elizabeth Barrett Browning "loved her father despite his intolerance. Generously she had excused his tyranny, which she saw as part of a broad social problem" (p. 4). Oakley treats as thematic the lament of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's father, "'My daughter, it's a pity you were not a boy'" (p. 18). And Peters angrily observes "the injustice of [Patrick Brontë's] partiality for his reckless son" (p. 233) in comparison with his relative neglect of his devoted daughters' literary talents.

Paternal Roles

There is no comparable biographical treatment of father and brother roles. Biographers, whether male or female, tend to treat their subject's fatherhood in a fairly matter-of-fact, non-judgmental and standard way, irrespective of individual variations in the father's attitudes toward his children and in his fulfillment (or non-fulfillment) of his parental role. Generally, fatherhood is simply one of a myriad of roles, responsibilities, and activities in a very busy life. As such, however emotionally consuming it may be (it never seems to take much of any father's time), it is mentioned on an average of once in every hundred pages of the biographies studied here. Thus Maurois depicts Shelley as walking about with his first baby "in his arms singing to it a monotonous tune of his own making. The idea of bringing up a new being that he might save from prejudices was delightful to him. As an admirer of Rousseau he expected Harriet to suckle the child herself and he was eager to give the tenderest care to both" (p. 135), though this resolution soon dissipates and is not revived with the birth of subsequent children. Though Antonia Fraser claims that Oliver Cromwell was the most conscientious and loving of fathers, she demonstrates this primarily during the crises of his children's adult lives, particularly upon their deaths: "Oliver never recovered

from [his favorite daughter] Bettie's death [at 29] . . . . a fact recognized by his contemporaries" (p. 665). Yet in this ample biography of 706 pages, even the trauma of this event warrants only a page.

Maternal Roles

There are numerous biographies of women exceptional for their professional talents, their beauty, their sexual or political prowess; there are no biographies, to my knowledge, of women exceptional solely for their fecundity or their consummate performance of their maternal role. Consequently, it is not surprising that in biographies of women exceptional for reasons other than parenthood, their maternity is seen in relation to its significance in the totality of their lives. Thus while Mary Queen of Scots languished in captivity, her only child, James, was reared to adulthood and political position by others and never did "show himself in the light of a loving, yet alone obedient, son to Mary. It was Mary's tragedy that she continued to believe that he would do so, and that she had from the first a totally false impression of the mother-son relationship" (Fraser, p. 526).

Feminist Press biographers, however, diminish their subjects' maternity to much less importance than it assumed in their actual lives. Describing it in cliché summaries, they convey the impression that how the woman functioned as a mother and felt about her motherhood are matters of indifference to the biographers, and should be to the readers, as well. For instance, Oakley duly notes the births of each of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's seven children, but except for one mundane description of a spanking "Elizabeth concluded that it was sometimes necessary to apply reason to the seat of the pants" (p. 71), she says little about Stanton's views or methods of child rearing except to reiterate the obvious, that "Family cares . . . continued to consume far too much of her time" (p. 55). Sometimes such stereotypical thinking on the biographer's part impedes accuracy. To observe, twenty-five years after the birth of her first child, that because the children were growing up, "Fortunately, Elizabeth was at last free for her work" (p. 76), ignores or undervalues Stanton's already enormous contributions to the suffragette movement, as well as the capable administration of her own household, which is "work" of another sort whether or not the biographer wishes to call it that.

Husband and Lover Roles

Biographers of men tend to treat their roles as husbands in about the same way as their fatherhood; it is simply one activity among many, and that not paramount--unless the man is also a notorious lover, like Shelley, in which case the romantic life gets disproportionate emphasis because of its sentimental possibilities. These biographers often implicitly condone a double standard not only of sexuality but of respect for human rights. In Maurois's view whatever Shelley does is right because Shelley is Ariel, whose free spirit must find fulfillment even if it results in the abandonment and suicide of one wife and the

deception and disillusionment of another. Forty-two years later Maurois's views remain constant in Victor Hugo. Hugo paid the enormous debts of one of his two principal mistresses, Juliette Drouet, and required in exchange "redemption through love" (p. 56). Juliette, "who the day before had been one of the most admired women in Paris (p. 56), had to relinquish her luxurious life, abandon her expectation of a theatrical career, and devote her whole life to Hugo, copying his manuscripts and mending his clothes. She could not even leave her room without him, which meant that when he was absent she was confined for days on end (p. 56). Maurois's only comment is the wide-eyed but otherwise non-judgmental observation that this is "the most amazing life of penitence and cloistered renunciation that a woman has ever accepted, outside monastic orders" (p. 56); thereafter, he takes for granted this relationship that lasted (with somewhat greater freedom for Juliette after its initial decade) for fifty years, until this self-obliterating woman died.

Women in Love

Biographical interest in many women derives from their closeness to an important man, either through marital or extra-marital intimacy, whether Madame Pompadour, Samuel Johnson's good friend Mrs. Thrale, or everybody's good friend Elizabeth Ray. Each of the women in my study is well-known for her professional talents or political position. Yet many of their biographers concentrate on their romantic relationships--real or imagined--with men or women, at the expense of their professional activities.

Although my initial hypothesis was that love affairs are emphasized far more intensively in biographies of women than of men, evidence does not support this. My preliminary research seems to indicate (and more is needed) that except for the Feminist Press biographers, on the whole women biographers devote more space to the love affairs of their subjects, men or women, than men biographers do, and they inflate flimsier evidence in the process. Thus Emily Dickinson's alleged love for the Rev. George Gould occupies 1/10th of Genevieve Taggard's intuitive biography, while Emily's alleged love for the Rev. Charles Wadsworth warrants only 1/16th of George Whicher's sober volume.[11] Keats's demonstrable relationship with Fanny Brawne occupies 1/8th of Aileen Ward's scholarly biography, but only 1/15th of W.J. Bate's equally scholarly Keats, published in the same year.

Yet when the same biographer, man or woman, writes about both men and women, the women's love lives are emphasized far more prominently than the men's. This may sometimes be due to the relative prominence of actual romantic intrigue. Antonia Fraser rightly focuses in abundant detail on the inter-relationship between love and politics that is a leitmotif of Mary Queen of Scots; and with equal justice spends only three pages on Oliver Cromwell's alleged mistresses, concluding that "Fatherly overtones are . . . more apparent than sexual ones" "even if the latter were perhaps entangled in the former" (p. 481). At other times the responsibility for the emphasis lies with the biographer rather than with the life. Thus Maurois devotes about 70 per cent of Léila to

George Sand's numerous liaisons, despite the fact that she spent six to eight hours every day throughout her entire adult life on her writing. Yet the same biographer devotes only about 25 per cent of Victor Hugo to that equally prolific and hardworking author's equally prominent love affairs.

Women as Wives

Feminist Press biographers lean, sometimes very awkwardly, in the opposite direction. In Lupton's Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert's courtship receives three unsentimental paragraphs (pp. 24-25). Oakley's Elizabeth Cady Stanton virtually ignores Henry Stanton from the moment of their marriage until forty-seven years later, when he died, even though he was a prominent abolitionist and an active promoter of some of the same causes his wife so fervently espoused. After mentioning his death Oakley explains, with a truism unsatisfactory because it is vague and unsubstantiated, "Henry had been important for her, and she treasured the memories of those long years together, but life involved more than one person, even a beloved husband" (p. 118).

Not all feminist biographers adopt this reverse double standard, however, Gerda Lerner's discussion of the marriage of Angelina Grimké and Theodore Weld establishes their romantic love and places it in the context of the abolitionist and feminist causes which had brought them together, and to which both were devoted. Her account represents a judicious blending of her subject's philosophy, biology, and the circumstances of the marriage: "Weld had no intention of cutting short his wife's public career nor did he believe that this was an inevitable consequence of marriage" (p. 291). Nevertheless, Lerner claims that in fact Angelina's feminist activities were "stifled" by the consequences of childbearing and domesticity, particularly by a prolapsed uterus and a hernia (pp. 290-291).

Method in These Biographies

Biographical method and techniques do not seem to be sex linked, but linked rather to the individual biographer's emphases, literary style, and research procedures. These may change from subject to subject and book to book, as they do from Maurois's novelistic Ariel (1924), replete with imagined dialogues, interior monologues, and romantic settings, to his solidly-researched Léila (1953), with the romance of setting and events now thoroughly documented, and with long quotations from letters replacing imagined dialogues and substantiating interior monologues.

No one is guaranteed what every one of us would like--a thorough, well-documented, accurate and judicious biography, written with elegance and clarity--for no potential biographical subject, man or woman, is immune from the vague, the unsubstantiated, the inept, or the fabricated. The various Lives of Emily Dickinson are a case in point, and their caliber is less related to the gender of either the biographer or the subject than to the biographer's method, point of view, and skills.

They range from MacGregor Jenkins's chatty reminiscences of three score years earlier, when as a child he played in "Miss Emily's" garden and received various rapturous but enigmatic notes (and once, a basket of gingerbread) from the white butterfly in her cocoon; to Josephine Pollitt's and Genevieve Taggard's quasi-novelistic interpretations of a life of romantic anguish and renunciation, based on largely unsubstantiated, subjective readings of the poetry; to George Whicher's Millicent Bingham's, Thomas Johnson's, and Richard Sewall's convincing and impressive volumes, which convey extensive research and scholarly commonsense through the lucid writing that does ample justice to its subject.

In connection with biographical technique, we must note the common practice of referring to the women subjects of biography by their first names or their first and last names, but of calling men by their last names only. The only exception to this in all the biographies studied here is Maurois's alternation of "George" with "Sand"; probably the masculine pseudonym permits this employment of a technique otherwise applied exclusively to men.

The use of first or last names in biography is not an index of the biographer's familiarity with the subject nor is it a mark of affection, respect--or contempt. Certainly Antonia Fraser "likes," knows, and respects Mary Queen of Scots and Cromwell equally. If such divided nomenclature is sexist, then it is a reflection of the sexist practices of the biographers' culture which every biographer--even the most feminist--follows here.

Definitions of Feminist and Sexist Biographies

On the basis of the evidence presented, we can arrive inductively at fairly comprehensive definitions of feminist and sexist biographies.

Feminist biographies are characterized by a high proportion of the following features. Most significantly, they are about women whose temperaments, dedication, and vision enable them to fulfill their own creative impulses or to promote the rights and activities of other women. They emphasize activity, whether intellectual, social, or physical. They praise the end results of these activities that further feminist concerns --books written, organizations established, consciousnesses raised--at the expense of those that do not. In deemphasizing psychology, unlike many other biographies of women, feminist biographies often understate their subjects' emotional lives and human relationships, whether filial, sororal, romantic, or maternal. Thus they tend to view their subjects from the outside, rather than from the inside, from their impact on their relevant social, political, or other milieus and vice-versa.

Sexist biographies are less easy to define as a coherent group because sexism in biography, whether unwitting or intentional, is much more pervasive than are biographies that are purposely and exclusively intended to be sexist. The following characteristics typify biographies that exhibit sexism.

Sexist biographies tend to divide up the human universe into two discrete, highly different, often antagonistic camps--Men and Women. They accept the traditional roles for men--breadwinner, paterfamilias, homme d'affaires; and for women--as mistresses, wives, mothers, and servants of men (whether fathers, brothers, lovers, or husbands) before themselves and, if necessary, at the expense of their own self-fulfillment. Thus their concerns with women, even those who have professions, are with the conventionally "feminine" aspects of their lives and personalities, with their "feminine" (for better or worse) temperament, with their psychology rather than their activities, with their love affairs and other human relationships rather than their work. Sexist biographes remain oblivious to the social forces to which feminist biographies are so sensitive, those phenomena of custom, law, and circumstance that conspire to keep women subordinate to men.

The sex of the biographer is not the necessary determinant of the biography's orientation; both sexist and feminist biographies may be written by either men or women.

The excesses of the feminist biographies are the deficiencies of the sexist lives, and vice-versa. There are, indeed, many excellent biographies that represent a balance between these extremes, but more of that another time.[12] Sexism in biography has been with us, perhaps, as long as death and taxes. And, whether or not one approves of the characteristics and emphases of feminist biographies, these relative newcomers can provide a valuable corrective (even if through their own excesses) of biographical sexism by exhibiting alternative ways of emphasizing and interpreting women's personalities, human relationships, activities, achievements.

Footnotes

[1] Orlando: A Biography (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928), rpt. (New York: Signet, 1960), p. 202.

[2] Pollitt, Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of Her Poetry (New York: Harper, 1930); Taggard, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson (New York: Knopf, 1934); Whicher, This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson (New York: Scribner's, 1938); rpt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957); Jenkins, Emily Dickinson, Friend and Neighbor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939); Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson (New York: Harper, 1945); Chase, Emily Dickinson (n.p.: William Sloane Associates, 1951); Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951); Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955); Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974).

[3] New York: Harper and Row, 1953; rpt. New York, Pyramid, 1968.

[4] London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969; rpt. New York: Dell, 1971.

[5] See also Peggy Rosenthal, "Feminism and Life in Feminist Biography," College English, 36:2 (Oct. 1974), 180-184.

[6] Maurois says that some dialogues between the two are taken verbatim from Sand's actual conversations with Marie Dorval (p. 18).

[7] If the biographies were more directly employing Freudian psychology, which uses biology as part of its theory of personality, this conclusion might be altered.

[8] This is not the case in biographies of film stars, men or women, whose personal lives were often molded by crafty directors and publicity managers to fit their sultry, sexy screen images. See Lynn Z. Bloom, "Tramps, Sheiks, and Femmes Fatales: On- and Off-Screen Images of '20s Film Stars in Popular Biographies and Autobiographies." Midwest Modern Language Association, St. Louis, October, 1974.

[9] pp. 83-117. Thomas Johnson discusses the same subject in three sentences, pp. 16-17.

[10] Of course, the social roles in lives of royalty are to a large extent predetermined, though a given royal "style" may be somewhat of an individual matter.

[11] Whicher demolishes Taggard's "evidence" for the Gould love affair in two precisely scathing paragraphs, concluding "There is not the slightest ground for supposing that Emily Dickinson's love poems were addressed to [Gould]; a few of them were clearly written after the lover's death, and Gould outlived Emily!"

[12] Among those studied here are all the Keats biographies, Fraser's biographies, and Sewall's Emily Dickinson.

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